

Title: Teaching Tone: Utilizing Writing Center Coaching in First-Year Composition Peer Review

Purpose: Many first-year writing students represent writing assignments as distinct moments or “discreet units,” as described by composition scholar Nancy Sommers. In these cases, the comments provided on the papers by teachers, classmates, or tutors are applicable only to that one instance of fixing the paper as opposed to being applied to the student writer’s past, present, and future writing occasions. Because of this tendency to isolate writing occasions, teachers must work to make instruction stick for the long run and be a “bridge” to other writing assignments, as opposed to only applying the material to the one instance of the paper (Sommers, 2013, p. 10).

Theoretical Framework: In his landmark article, *The Idea of a Writing Center*, Stephen North (1984) challenged writing teachers and writing center directors to work on improving the writer and not just the piece of writing. Even though this article was published in the 1980s, this advice still holds today as students and teachers alike focus more on the paper rather than on the development of a student’s identity as a writer. When writing is treated as an isolated moment, as seen in one paper only, the student may not transfer that experience to other writing experiences in other classes and outside of college, resulting in stagnation in writing ability. One way to avoid treating writing as an isolated instance is to revise the way students and teachers respond to student writing; in particular, Nancy Sommers describes the importance of “tone” and how tone plays a vital role in “encouraging students to become stronger writers and by extension, stronger students” (p. 6). An encouraging tone was described as “gifts given by someone who walks with you” and a discouraging tone was described as “taking something away from a student” (p. 6).

Methods: After attaining an IRB approval, the two researchers partnered for an entire first-year writing class to focus on the interaction between students and writing center coaches as they conducted peer review on essays. Three times during the semester, writing center coaches attended class to offer feedback in small groups (3 to 4 students). The coaches modeled and taught “encouraging tone” for the students in the small groups, illustrating potential questions to ask. After three visits, the students in the class conducted the final peer review without the guided review of the writing center coaches. At the end of the semester, the instructor handed out a qualitative anonymous survey for students to complete, which focused on techniques of encouraging tone in peer review sessions, how the approach could be applied to other writing occasions across disciplines, and students’ own views of themselves as writers. The survey data was collected and thematically coded for presentation.

Results: Based on initial results, the use of encouraging tone requires writing coaches and writing teachers to “come off the paper” and ask reflective questions about potential applications to other disciplines. The presentation will include

sample questions for attendees to use in their classes as well as specific responses from students.

Implications: The data from our study indicates that most students are uncomfortable providing any feedback (especially negative feedback), so the use of tone is an important lesson for responders. Many responders were reading for error detection or what was missing (in deficit), rather than working on identifying and building off of what was working and creating confidence. Because comments on writing “carry messages larger than the words themselves,” teaching tone becomes essential for student writers to develop their “authority as writers” (Sommers, 2013, p. 6). How the message is conveyed is just as important as what it contains.

Recommendations: The presenters recommend re-visioning peer review in the writing classroom, centered around teaching encouraging tone and coming off the paper to develop a student as a writer rather than a student writing a single assignment.

References:

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